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Japan: Can Portcall Status Quo be Maintained?

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Summary

The New Zealand Government's refusal to allow nuclear-capable ships to make portcalls has revived a contentious issue in Japan that has generally been quiet since the early 1980s. Media attention, pressure from the opposition parties, and efforts by local officials in major Japanese ports to seek nonnuclear confirmations have all increased, but Tokyo has held fast to its established portcall arrangements with Washington. We believe that as long as the government sticks to its traditional policy, it can contain threats to US ship visits. However, international attention, such as the recent confusion surrounding China's portcall policy, or moves by leftist-oriented city councils or mayors to challenge Tokyo's authority could again bring the issue into full national prominence.

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Japan's postwar security policy is based on the Mutual Security Treaty, which affords protection under the US nuclear umbrella. Since the 1970s, the recognition of the US nuclear role has coexisted in Japanese public opinion, at times uneasily, with Japan's three nonnuclear principles, which state Japan will not possess, manufacture, or allow the introduction of nuclear weapons into the country. [REDACTED]

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US forces are granted the use of bases in Japan under Article VI of the Security Treaty and Article V of the Status of Forces Agreement. To allay public concern that the United States might bring nuclear weapons into Japan, Tokyo insisted that the 1960 treaty revision incorporate an exchange of notes committing Washington to consult with Tokyo before introducing nuclear weapons. Neither government spelled out whether "introduction" referred to transit of US warships and aircraft carrying nuclear weapons or only to stationing of US nuclear weapons in Japan. Subsequently, when pressed by the opposition to state publicly whether the United States was secretly bringing nuclear weapons into the country, Japanese officials insisted that because Japan had not received a US request for prior consultation, they trusted nuclear weapons were not being introduced. [REDACTED]

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Controversial statements by former US officials familiar with Japan's portcall policy have threatened to upset the status quo. In 1974, retired Rear Admiral Gene Larocque's testimony before Congress that US nuclear-armed warships regularly called on Japan resulted in considerable media attention, Diet debate, and large public protests at Yokosuka and Sasebo. Former Ambassador Reischauer's statement, in a 1981 press interview, that US warships armed with nuclear weapons had transitted Japanese ports for decades with Tokyo's knowledge and tacit approval unleashed an even larger political storm in Japan. The media and opposition launched a campaign against then Prime Minister Suzuki, already in trouble in part because of his inept handling of several other security-related issues. After denying Reischauer's charges, the Prime Minister asserted that:

- o "Introduction" unquestionably included base visits by US warships and aircraft carrying nuclear weapons, which would require prior consultations.
- o The Japanese Government would reject any US request for a nuclear-armed warship to enter a Japanese port--even in an emergency.

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- o The US and Japanese governments had no difference in interpretation of these points. [REDACTED]

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Suzuki's clarification of Japan's policy quieted his critics, but it also dispelled some of the ambiguity that had allowed Tokyo to interpret flexibly the US-Japan portcall arrangement. Since 1981 Tokyo nonetheless has held the line on portcalls by nuclear-capable warships. For example, faced with criticism in 1984 of the scheduled deployment of nuclear-capable Tomahawk cruise missiles on 7th Fleet ships home-ported in Japan, the government argued that the ability to carry nuclear weapons and the question of whether nuclear weapons were actually on board were entirely different matters. Tokyo held it could not reject a portcall simply because a ship had the capability to carry nuclear weapons, as long as Washington had not requested prior consultation. [REDACTED]

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New Zealand and the USS Buchanan

Prime Minister Lange's nonnuclear portcall policy and subsequent refusal to permit the USS Buchanan to dock in New Zealand have reopened the debate over Japan's portcall policies. In an effort to keep their antinuclear platforms before the public, both the Japan Communist Party (JCP) and the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) have suggested that Japan follow New Zealand's lead. In a mid-February effort to provoke the government to respond in the Diet, a JSP spokesman asked whether Japan could legally initiate prior consultation under the Security Treaty or perhaps follow New Zealand's example by using its own data to determine whether US ships visiting Japanese ports were carrying nuclear weapons. The JSP's suggestion of unilateral Japanese action implicitly endorses political actions in several locales--some of which predate the New Zealand policy reversal--by leftist mayors and leftist-dominated city assemblies to issue antinuclear declarations. In some large seaports, local authorities also have tried to require visiting warships to affirm they are not carrying nuclear weapons. [REDACTED] NF)

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Thus far, Tokyo has effectively handled these interrelated problems. In response to JSP questioning, Foreign Minister Abe and his senior subordinates reiterated the government's position. They asserted:

- o New Zealand, unlike Japan, has decided to reject portcalls by ships capable of carrying nuclear weapons because it cannot determine whether nuclear weapons are on board.

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- o In contrast to the ANZUS pact, the Mutual Security Treaty obligates Washington to seek prior consultation with Tokyo if nuclear weapons are introduced into Japan.
- o The Security Treaty requires Japan to permit US ships to visit Japanese ports, and Japan cannot reject such portcalls unless they become an object of prior consultation.
- o Because Washington has not requested prior consultation and the security relationship is based on mutual trust, Tokyo can only assume the United States has not violated its obligation.
- o Under the treaty, prior consultation must be proposed by the US side. [REDACTED]

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By tying revision of portcall policy to a revision of the Security Treaty, the government appears to have temporarily robbed the JSP of its issue. Tokyo has handled the problem of local antinuclear declarations by continuing to assert that national security policy, particularly if it involves a treaty, supercedes local ordinances. In addition, several potentially contentious portcalls were postponed until leftist-oriented councils were not in session.

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Third Country Portcalls

By highlighting the nuclear portcall issue, the New Zealand policy has increased Tokyo's sensitivity to inconsistencies in its portcall policy as it affects European navies. Inadequate coordination and a general lack of experience, for example, have led the Foreign Ministry's European Bureau to react differently to French and British portcall requests. The Ministry did not intervene in 1981 when local authorities asked French naval officers to sign a nonnuclear declaration before the aircraft carrier Jeanne d'Arc visited Kobe. The French Embassy also confirmed the Jeanne d'Arc's conventional weaponry in the aide

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[redacted]

memoire requesting the portcall. The French have since told Washington that their move was a mistake. [redacted]

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In February 1984 London cancelled a Japan stop by the aircraft carrier HMS Invincible to avoid a conflict with Tokyo over the British policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons. Britain's policy is essentially the same as that of the United States, but London does not have a prior consultation agreement with Tokyo. [redacted]

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The US Embassy in Tokyo reports that the Foreign Ministry is considering the broader ramifications of differences between procedures governing US and European portcall requests. In the wake of the Invincible experience, responsibility for processing and handling portcalls other than those by US ships has been assigned to the Ministry's newly established Security Policy Office in the Planning and Research Bureau. This office has been tasked to develop a formula that could serve the same function for other Western nations as the prior consultation provision does for the United States. [redacted]

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Outlook

The portcall questions raised by New Zealand's policy have the potential to become a major political problem in Japan. At a minimum, some local municipalities will continue to demand nonnuclear declarations. The Communists and Socialists also will try to exploit the issue and to energize public opinion. The Japanese antinuclear movement's involvement in the portcall issue, spearheaded primarily by the JSP, will, we believe, remain domestic in orientation, despite attempts by some JSP leaders to link it to an Asia-Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone movement. Most other opposition groups in Japan have not sided with the JSP on the antinuclear issue. A large portion of the JSP membership also are unenthusiastic about the movement. They consider it an attempt by the party's chairman to consolidate his leadership by using a conspicuous and emotional cause. Local authorities will continue to request nonnuclear declarations more as a means to challenge Tokyo's authority than an end in themselves. [redacted]

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We believe that the Japanese Government will be able to hold the line. For the portcall question to take on serious proportions, in our view, it will probably need a catalyst as prominent as the one presented four years ago by Reischauer's statement. And, for lesser headaches, Prime Minister Nakasone, because of his knowledge of defense-related issues, is far more able to cope than was Suzuki. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

The Japanese media also have been careful for the most part in drawing implications for Japan from the US-New Zealand impasse. They have not tried to link the issue to the broader antinuclear movement in Europe. Moreover, most editorials have concentrated on the potential threat to stability of the ANZUS pact. Some have praised Japan's policy of trusting Washington to honor its promise to observe Japanese nuclear sensitivities. A few have gone as far as to remark on the inconsistency that would arise if Japan continued to rely on the US nuclear deterrent but refused to support the US forces that provided that deterrent. In sum, despite public concern over the three nonnuclear principles, the Japanese people apparently will tolerate the status quo as long as Tokyo and Washington stand by their established positions. The Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, will continue to seek a more coordinated approach to third country portcalls. [REDACTED]

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